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MEMORIALS OF TWO FRIENDS

MEMORIALS
OF
TWO FRIENDS
JAMES RUSSELL
LOWELL: 1819-1891
GEORGE WILLIAM
CURTIS: 1824-1892

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NOTE

"Like the old hand-grasp, when at Shady Hill
We met,"—

SO wrote Lowell to Curtis. Happily their host is still at Shady Hill, and to these "Memorials of Two Friends" he has kindly consented to add his Ashfield address on George William Curtis.

For permission to print the address on James Russell Lowell I am indebted to the courtesy of Messrs. Harper & Bros. Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. granted the privilege of using "An Epistle to George William Curtis."

E. B. H.

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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL
AN ADDRESS BY GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS
FEBRUARY TWENTY-SECOND MDCCCXCII

THE birthday of Washington not only recalls a great historic figure, but it reminds us of the quality of great citizenship. His career is at once our inspiration and our rebuke. Whatever is lofty, fair and patriotic in public conduct, instinctively we call by his name; whatever is base, selfish, and unworthy, is shamed by the lustre of his life. Like the flaming sword turning every way that guarded the gate of Paradise, Washington's example is the beacon shining at the opening of our annals and lighting the path of our national life.

But the service that makes great citizenship is as various as genius and tem-

perament. Washington's conduct of the war was not more valuable to the country than his organization of the Government, and it was not his special talent but his character that made both of those services possible. In public affairs the glamour of arms is always dazzling. It is the laurels of Miltiades, not those of Homer, or Solon, or Gorgias, which disturb and inspire the young Themistocles. But while military glory stirs the popular heart, it is the traditions of natural grandeur, the force of noble character, immortal works of literature and art, which nourish the sentiment that makes men patriots and heroes. The eloquence of Demosthenes aroused decadent Greece at least to strike for independence. The song of Koerner fired the resistless charge of Lützow's cavalry. A pamphlet of our Revolution revived the flickering flame of colonial patriotism. The speech, the song, the written word, are deeds no less than the clash of arms at Chæronea and Yorktown and Gettysburg.

It is not only Washington the soldier and the statesman, but Washington the citizen, whom we chiefly remember. Americans are accused of making an excellent and patriotic Virginia gentleman a mythological hero and demi-god. But what mythological hero or demi-god is a figure so fair? We say nothing of him to-day that was not said by those who saw and knew him, and in phrases more glowing than ours, and the concentrated light of a hundred years discloses nothing to mar the nobility of the incomparable man.

It was while the personal recollections and impressions of him were still fresh, while, as Lowell said, "Boston was not yet a city and Cambridge was still a country village," that Lowell was born in Cambridge seventy-three years ago to-day. His birth on Washington's birthday seems to me a happy coincidence, because each is so admirable an illustration of the two forces whose union has made America. Massachusetts and Vir-

ginia, although of very different origin and character, were the two colonial leaders. In Virginia politics, as in the aristocratic salons of Paris on the eve of the French revolution, there was always a theoretical democracy; but the spirit of the State was essentially aristocratic and conservative. Virginia was the Cavalier of the Colonies, Massachusetts was the Puritan; and when John Adams, New England personified, said in the Continental Congress that Washington ought to be General, the Puritan and the Cavalier clasped hands. The union of Massachusetts and Virginia for that emergency foretold the final union of the States, after a mighty travail of difference, indeed, and long years of strife.

The higher spirit of conservatism, its reverence for antiquity, its susceptibility to the romance of tradition, its instinct for continuity and development, and its antipathy to violent rupture; the grace and charm and courtesy of established social order, in a word, the feminine ele-

ment in national life, however far from actual embodiment in Virginia or in any colony, was to blend with the masculine force and creative energy of the Puritan spirit and produce all that we mean by America. This was the consummation which the Continental Congress did not see, but which was none the less forecast when John Adams summoned Washington to the chief revolutionary command. It is the vision which still inspires the life and crowns the hope of every generous American, and it has had no truer interpreter and poet than Lowell. Well was he born on the anniversary of Washington's birth, for no American was ever more loyal to the lofty spirit, the grandeur of purpose, the patriotic integrity which invest the name of Washington with imperishable glory; and none ever felt more deeply the scorn of ignoble and canting Americanism.

The house in which Lowell was born has long been known as Elmwood, a stately house embowered in lofty trees,

still full, in their season, of singing birds. It is one of the fine old mansions of which a few yet linger in the neighborhood of Boston, and it still retains its dignity of aspect, but a dignity somewhat impaired by the encroaching advance of the city with its display of the architectural taste of a later day. The house has its traditions, for it was built before the Revolution by the last loyal Lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts, whose stout allegiance to the British crown was never shaken, and who left New England with regret when New England, also not without natural filial regret, left the British empire. It is a legend of Elmwood that Washington was once its guest, and after the Revolution it was owned by Elbridge Gerry, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who occupied it when he was Vice-president.

Not far from Elmwood, Lowell's life-long home, is the house which is doubly renowned as the headquarters of Washington and the home of Longfellow. Nearer the colleges stands the branching

elm—twin heir with the Charter Oak of patriotic story—under which Washington took command of the revolutionary army. Indeed, Cambridge is all revolutionary ground, and rich with revolutionary tradition. Lexington common is but six miles away. Along the West Cambridge road galloped Paul Revere to Concord. Yonder marched the militia to Bunker Hill. Here were the quarters in which Burgoyne's red-coats were lodged after the surrender at Saratoga. But peaceful among the storied scenes of war stands the University, benign mother of educated New England, coeval with the Puritan settlement which has given the master impulse to American civilization.

The American is fortunate who, like Lowell, is born among such historic scenes and local associations, and to whose cradle the good fairy has brought the gift of sensitive appreciation. His birthplace was singularly adapted to his genius and his taste. The landscape, the life, the figures of Cambridge constantly appear both

in his prose and verse, but he lays little stress upon its historic reminiscences. It is the picturesqueness, the character, the humor of the life around him which attract him. This apparent indifference to the historic charm of the neighborhood is illustrated in a little story that Lowell tells of his first visit to the White Mountains. In the Franconia Notch he stopped to chat with a recluse in a saw-mill busy at work, and asked him the best point of view for the Old Man of the Mountain. The busy workman answered, "Dun no; never see it." Lowell continues, "Too young and too happy to feel or affect the Horatian indifference, I was sincerely astonished, and I expressed it. The log-compelling man attempted no justification, but after a little asked, 'Come from Baws'n?' 'Yes' (with peninsular pride). 'Goodle to see in the vycinity o' Baws'n?' 'Oh, yes!' I said. 'I should like, 'awl I *should* like to stan' on Bunker Hill. You've ben there offen, likely?' 'No-o,' unwillingly, seeing the little end of the

horn in clear vision at the terminus of this Socratic perspective. ''Awl, my young frien', you've larned neow thet wut a man *kin* see any day he never *doos* see. Nawthin' pay, nawthin' vally.' "

Lowell entered college at fifteen and graduated at nineteen, in 1838. His literary taste and talent were already evident, for in literature even then he was an accomplished student, and he was the poet of his class, although at the close of his last year he was rusticated at Concord,— a happy exile, — where he saw Emerson, and probably Henry Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, who was often a guest in Emerson's house. It was here that he wrote the Class poem which gave no melodious hint of the future man, and disclosed the fact that this child of Cambridge, although a student, was as yet wholly uninfluenced by the moral and intellectual agitation called, derisively, Transcendentalism.

Of this agitation John Quincy Adams writes in his diary in 1840: "A young man

named Ralph Waldo Emerson, a son of my once-loved friend William Emerson, and a classmate of my lamented son George, after failing in the every day avocation of a Unitarian preacher and school-master, starts a new doctrine of transcendentalism; declares all the old revelations superannuated and worn out, and announces the approach of new revelations and prophecies. Garrison and the non-resistant Abolitionists, Brownson and the Marat Democrats, phrenology and animal magnetism all come in, furnishing each some plausible rascality as an ingredient for the bubbling cauldron of religion and politics." There could be no better expression of the bewildered and indignant consternation with which the old New England of fifty years ago regarded the awakening of the newer New England, of which John Quincy Adams himself was to be a characteristic leader, and which was to liberalize still further American thought and American politics, enlarging religious liberty, and

abolishing human slavery. Like other Boston and Harvard youth of about his time, or a little earlier,—Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Edmund Quincy, Lothrop Motley, Oliver Wendell Holmes,—Lowell seemed to be born for studious leisure or professional routine, as yet unheeding and unconscious of the real forces that were to mould his life. Of these forces the first and the most enduring was an early and happy passion for a lovely and high-minded woman who became his wife—the Egeria who exalted his youth and confirmed his noblest aspirations; a heaven-eyed counsellor of the serener air who filled his mind with peace and his life with joy.

During these years Lowell greatly impressed his college comrades, although no adequate literary record of the promise which they felt survives. When he left college and studied law the range of his reading was already extraordinarily large, and his observation of nature singularly active and comprehensive. His

mind and memory, like the Green Vaults of Dresden, were rich with treasures accumulated from every source. But his earliest songs echoed the melodies of other singers and foretold no fame. They were the confused murmuring of the bird while the dawn is deepening into day. Partly his fastidious taste, his conservative disposition, and the utter content of happy love, lapped him in soft Lydian airs which the angry public voices of the time did not disturb. But it was soon clear that the young poet whose early verses sang only his own happiness would yet fulfill Schiller's requirement that the poet shall be a citizen of his age as well as of his country.

One of his most intimate friends, the late Charles F. Briggs, for many years a citizen of Brooklyn, and known in the literary New York of forty years ago as Harry Franco, said of him, with fine insight, that Lowell was naturally a politician, but a politician like Milton—a man, that is to say, with an instinctive grasp of

the higher politics, of the duties and relations of the citizen to his country, and of those moral principles which are as essential to the welfare of States as oxygen to the breath of human life. "He will never narrow himself to a party which does not include mankind," said his friend, "nor consent to dally with his muse when he can invoke her aid in the cause of the oppressed and suffering." This was the just perception of affectionate intimacy. It foretold not only literary renown but patriotic inspiration, and consequent political influence in its truest and most permanent form. In Lowell's mind, as in Milton's, the spirit of the question of Sir Philip Sidney to Hubert Languet presently roused a quickening glow: "To what purpose should our thought be directed to various kinds of knowledge, unless room be afforded for putting it into practice so that public advantage may be the result?" It was not a Puritan nor a republican who wrote the words, but they contain the essential spirit of

Puritan statesmanship and scholarship on both sides of the ocean.

The happy young scholar at Elmwood, devoted to literature and love, and unheeding the great movement of public affairs, showed from time to time that beneath the lettered leisure of his life there lay the conscience and moral virility that give public effect to genius and accomplishment. Lowell's development as a literary force in public affairs is unconsciously and exquisitely portrayed in the prelude to Sir Launfal in 1848:—

" Over his keys the musing organist
Beginning doubtfully and far away,
First lets his fingers wander as they list,
And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay;
Then as the touch of his loved instrument
Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent
Along the wavering vista of his dream."

In 1844-45 his theme was no longer doubtful or far away. Although Mr. Gar-

rison and the early abolitionists refused to vote, as an act sanctioning a government which connived at slavery, yet the slavery question had already mastered American politics. In 1844 the Texas controversy absorbed public attention, and in that and the following year Lowell's poems on Garrison, Phillips, Giddings, Palfrey, and "On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves near Washington," like keen flashes leaping suddenly from a kindling pyre, announced that the antislavery cause had gained a powerful and unanticipated ally in literature. These and other of his poems, especially that on "The Present Crisis," have a Tyrtæan resonance, a stately rhetorical rhythm, that make their dignity of thought, their intense feeling, and picturesque imagery, superbly effective in recitation. They sang themselves on every antislavery platform. Wendell Phillips winged with their music and tipped with their flame the darts of his fervid appeal and manly scorn. As he quoted them with suppressed emotion in his low, me-

lodious, penetrating voice, the white plume of the resistless Navarre of eloquence gained loftier grace, that relentless sword of invective a more flashing edge.

The last great oration of Phillips was the discourse at Harvard University on the centenary of the Phi Beta Kappa. It was not the least memorable in that long series of memorable orations at Harvard of which the first in significance was Buckminster's in 1809, and the most familiar was Edward Everett's in 1824, its stately sentences culminating in the magnificent welcome to Lafayette, who was present. It was the first time that Phillips had been asked by his Alma Mater to speak at one of her festivals, and he rightly comprehended the occasion. He was never more himself, and he held an audience culled from many colleges and not predisposed to admire, in shuddering delight by the classic charm of his manner and the brilliancy of his unsparing censure of educated men as recreant to

political progress. The orator was nearly seventy years old. He was conscious that he should never speak again upon a greater occasion nor to a more distinguished audience, and as his discourse ended, as if to express completely the principle of his own life and of the cause to which it had been devoted and the spirit which alone could secure the happy future of his country if it was to justify the hope of her children, he repeated the words of Lowell:

"New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth;
Lo, before us gleam her camp fires! we ourselves must pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-rusted key."

When Lowell wrote the lines he was twenty-five years old. He was thoroughly stirred by the cause which Edmund

Quincy in reply to Motley's question, "What public career does America offer?" had declared to be "the noblest in the world." But Lowell felt that he was before all a poet. When he was twenty-seven he wrote: "If I have any vocation it is the making of verse. When I take my pen for that, the world opens itself ungrudgingly before me; everything seems clear and easy, as it seems sinking to the bottom would be, as one leans over the edge of his boat in one of those clear coves at Fresh Pond. But when I do prose it is *invita Minerva*. I feel as if I were wasting time and keeping back my message. My true place is to serve the cause as a poet. Then my heart leaps before me into the conflict." Already the musing organist had ceased to dream, and he was about to strike a chord in a strange and unexpected key, and with a force to which the public conscience would thrill in answer.

Lowell was an intense New Englander. There is no finer figure of the higher

Puritan type. The New England soil from which he sprang was precious to him. The New England legend, the New England language, New England character and achievement, were all his delight and familiar study. Nobody who has attempted to depict the Yankee ever knew him as Lowell knew him, for he was at heart the Yankee that he drew. The Yankee early became the distinctive representative of America. He is the Uncle Sam of comedy and caricature. Even the sweet-souled Irving could not resist the universal laugh, and gave it fresh occasion by his portrait of Ichabod Crane. Those who preferred the cavalier and courtier as a national type, traced the Yankee's immediate descent from the snivelling, sanctimonious, and crafty zealots of Cromwell's parliament. Jack Downing and Sam Slick, the coarser farces and stories broadly exaggerated this conception, and, in our great controversy of the century, the antislavery movement was derided as the superserviceable, sneaking fanati-

cism of the New England children of Tribulation Wholesome and Zeal-in-the-land-Busy, whom the southern sons of gallant cavaliers and gentlemen would teach better morals and manners. The Yankee was made a byword of scorn, and identified with a disturber of the national peace and the enemy of the glorious Union. Many a responsible citizen, many a prosperous merchant in New York and Boston and Philadelphia, many a learned divine, whose honor it was that they were Yankees, felt a half-hearted shame in the name, and grudged the part played by their noses in the conversation. They seemed perpetually to hear a voice of contempt saying, "Thy nose bewrayeth thee."

This was the figure which, with the instinct of genius, with true New England pride and the joy of conscious power, Lowell made the representative of liberty-loving, generous, humane, upright, wise, conscientious, indignant America. He did not abate the Yankee a jot or a

tittle. He magnified his characteristic drawl, his good-natured simplicity, his provincial inexperience. But he revealed his unbending principle, his supreme good-sense, his lofty patriotism, his unquailing courage. He scattered the clouds of hatred and ignorance that deformed and caricatured him, and showed him in his daily habit as he lived, the true and worthy representative of America, with mother wit preaching the gospel of Christ, and in plain native phrase applying it to a tremendous public exigency in Christian America. The Yankee dialect of New England, like the Yankee himself, had become a jest of farce and extravaganza. But, thoroughly aroused, Lowell grasped it as lightly as Hercules his club, and with it struck a deadly blow at the Hydra that threatened the national life. Burns did not give to the Scottish tongue a nobler immortality than Lowell to the dialect of New England.

In June 1846, the first Biglow paper, which, in a letter written at the time,

Lowell called "a squib of mine," was published in the *Boston Courier*. That squib was a great incident both in the history of American literature and politics. The serious tone of our literature from its grave colonial beginning had been almost unbroken. The rollicking laugh of "Knickerbocker" was a solitary sound in our literary air until the gay note of Holmes returned a merry echo. But humor as a literary force in political discussion was still more unknown, and in the fierce slavery controversy it was least to be anticipated. Banter in so stern a debate would seem to be blasphemy, and humor as a weapon of antislavery warfare was almost inconceivable. The letters of Major Jack Downing, a dozen years before the *Biglow Papers*, were merely political extravaganza to raise a derisive laugh. They were fun of a day and forgotten. Lowell's humor was of another kind. It was known to his friends, but it was not a characteristic of Lowell the author. In his early books there is no sign of it. It

was not a humorist whom the good-natured Willis welcomed in his airy way, thinking, perhaps, that another dainty and graceful trifler had entered the charmed circle of literature that pleases but not inspires.

But suddenly, and for the first time, the absorbing struggle of freedom and slavery for control of the Union was illuminated by a humor radiant and piercing, which broke over it like daylight, and exposed relentlessly the sophistry and shame of the slave power. No speech, no plea, no appeal was comparable in popular and permanent effect with this pitiless tempest of fire and hail, in the form of wit, argument, satire, knowledge, insight, learning, common-sense, and patriotism. It was humor of the purest strain, but humor in deadly earnest. In its course, as in that of a cyclone, it swept all before it—the Press, the Church, criticism, scholarship, and it bore resistlessly down upon the Mexican War, the pleas for slavery, the Congressional debates, the conspicu-

ous public men. Its contemptuous scorn of the public cowardice that acquiesced in the aggressions of the slave power startled the dormant manhood of the North and of the country.

"'The North hain't no kind o' bisness with nothin',
An' you've no idee how much bother it saves;
We ain't none riled by their frettin' and frothin',
We're *used* to layin' the string on our slaves,'
Sez John C. Calhoun, sez he;—
Sez Mister Foote,
'I should like to shoot
The holl gang, by the great horn spoon!' sez he.

"'The mass ough' to labor an' we lay on soffies,
Thet's the reason I want to spread Freedom's aree;
It puts all the cunninest on us in office,
An' reelises our Maker's orig'nal idee,'
Sez John C. Calhoun, sez he;—
'Thet's ez plain,' sez Cass,
'As thet some one's an ass,
It's ez clear ez the sun is at noon,' sez he.

"'Now don't go to say I'm the friend of oppression,

But keep all your spare breath fer coolin' your broth,
Fer I ollers hev strove (at least thet's my impression)
To make cussed free with the rights o' the North,'
Sez John C. Calhoun, sez he;—
'Yes,' sez Davis o' Miss.,
The perfection o' bliss
Is in skinnin' thet same old coon,' sez he."

Such lines, as with a stroke of lightning, were burned into the hearts and conscience of the North. Read to-day, they recall, as nothing else can recall, the intensity of the feeling which swiftly flamed into civil war.

Apart from their special impulse and influence, the *Biglow Papers* were essentially and purely American. It is sometimes said that the best American poetry is only English poetry written on this side of the ocean. But the *Biglow Papers* are as distinctively American as "Tam o' Shanter" is Scotch, or the "Divine Comedy" Italian. They could have been written nowhere else but in Yankee New England

by a New England Yankee. With *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they are the chief literary memorial of the contest — a memorial which, as literature, and for their own delight, our children's children will read, as we read to-day the satires that scourge the long-vanished Rome which Juvenal knew, and the orations of Burke that discuss long-perished politics. So strong was Lowell's antislavery ardor that he proudly identified himself with the Abolitionists. Simultaneously with the publication of the first series of the *Biglow Papers,* he became a corresponding editor with Edmund Quincy of the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, the organ of the American Antislavery Society, and in a letter to his friend, Sydney Howard Gay, the editor of the paper, he says: "I was not only willing but desirous that my name should appear, because I scorned to be indebted for any share of my modicum of popularity to my abolitionism, without incurring at the same time whatever odium might be attached to a complete identification

with a body of heroic men and women whom not to love and admire would prove me to be unworthy of those sentiments, and whose superiors in all that constitutes true manhood and womanhood I believe never existed."

But his antislavery ardor was far from being his sole and absorbing interest and activity. Lowell's studies, more and more various and incessant, were so comprehensive that he took, if not like Bacon, all knowledge, yet all literature for his province, and in 1855 he was appointed to the chair of modern languages and belles-lettres in Harvard University, succeeding Longfellow and Ticknor, an illustrious group of American scholars which gives to that chair a distinction unparalleled in our schools. His love and mastery of books were extraordinary, and his devotion to study so relentless, that in those earlier years he studied sometimes fourteen hours in the day, and pored over books until his sight seemed to desert him. And it was no idle or evanescent

reading. Probably no American student was so deeply versed in the old French romance, none knew Dante and the Italians more profoundly; German literature was familiar to him, and perhaps even Ticknor in his own domain of Spanish lore was not more a master than Lowell. The whole range of English literature, not only its noble Elizabethan heights, but a delightful realm of picturesque and unfrequented paths, were his familiar park of pleasance.

Yet he was not a scholarly recluse, a pedant, or a bookworm. The student of books was no less so acute and trained an observer of nature, so sympathetic a friend of birds and flowers, so sensitive to the influences and aspects of out-of-door life, that as Charles Briggs with singular insight said, that he was meant for a politician, so Darwin with frank admiration said, that he was born to be a naturalist. He was as much the contented companion of Izaak Walton and White of Selborne as of Donne or

Calderon. His social sympathies were no less strong than his fondness for study, and he was the most fascinating of comrades. His extraordinary knowledge, whether of out-door or of in-door derivation, and the racy humor in which his knowledge was fused, overflowed his conversation. There is no historic circle of wits and scholars, not that of Beaumont and Ben Jonson where, haply, Shakespeare sat, nor Dryden's, nor Pope's, nor Addison's, nor Dr. Johnson's Club, nor that of Edinburgh, nor any Parisian salon or German study, to which Lowell's abundance would not have contributed a golden drop and his glancing wit a glittering repartee. It was not of reading, merely, it was of the reading of a man of Lowell's intellectual power and resource that Bacon said, "reading maketh a full man."

He had said in 1846 that it was as a poet that he could do his best work. But the poetic temperament and faculty do not exclude prose, and like Milton's swain, "he touch'd the tender stops of various

quills." The young poet early showed that prose would be as obedient a familiar to his genius as the tricksy Ariel of verse. Racy and rich, and often of the most sonorous or delicate cadence, it is still the prose of a poet and a master of the differences of form. His prose, indeed, is often profoundly poetic—that is, quick with imagination, but always in the form of prose, not of poetry. It is so finely compact of illustration, of thought and learning, of wit and fancy and permeating humor, that his page sparkles and sways like a phosphorescent sea. "Oblivion," he says, "looks in the face of the Grecian muse only to forget her errand." And again: "The garners of Sicily are empty now, but the bees from all climes still fetch honey from the tiny garden-plot of Theocritus." Such concentrated sentences are marvels of felicity, and, although unmetred, are as exquisite as songs.

Charles Emerson said of Shakespeare, "he sat above this hundred-handed play

of his imagination pensive and conscious," and so Lowell is remembered by those who knew him well. Literature was his earliest love and his latest delight, and he has been often called the first man of letters of his time. The phrase is vague, but it expresses the feeling that while he was a poet and a scholar and a humorist and a critic, he was something else and something more. The feeling is perfectly just. Living all summer by the sea, we watch with fascinated eyes the long-flowing lines, the flash and gleam of multitudinous waters, but beneath them all is the mighty movement of unfathomed ocean, on whose surface only these undulating splendors play. Literature, whether in prose or verse, was the form of Lowell's activity, but its master impulse was not æsthetic but moral. When the activities of his life were ended, in a strain of clear and tender reminiscence he sang:

"I sank too deep in the soft-stuffed repose
That hears but rumors of earth's wrongs and woes;

Too well these Capuas could my muscles waste,
Not void of toils, but toils of choice and taste;
These still had kept me could I but have quelled
The Puritan drop that in my veins rebelled."

Literature was his pursuit, but patriotism was his passion. His love of country was that of a lover for his mistress. He resented the least imputation upon the ideal America, and nothing was finer than his instinctive scorn for the pinchbeck patriotism which brags and boasts and swaggers, insisting that bigness is greatness, and vulgarity simplicity, and the will of the majority the moral law. No man perceived more shrewdly the American readiness of resource, the Yankee good-nature, and the national rectitude. But he was not satisfied with an easy standard. To him the best, not the thriftiest, was most truly American. Lowell held that of all men the American should be master of his boundless material resources, not their slave; worthy of his unequalled opportunities, not the syco-

phant of his fellow Americans nor the victim of national conceit. No man rejoiced more deeply over our great achievements or celebrated them with ampler or prouder praise. He delighted with Yankee glee in our inventive genius and restless enterprise, but he knew that we did not invent the great muniments of liberty,—trial by jury, the habeas corpus, constitutional restraint, the common school,—of all which we were common heirs with civilized Christendom. He knew that we have Niagara and the prairies and the Great Lakes, and the majestic Mississippi; but he knew also with another great American that

> "Earth proudly wears the Parthenon
> As the best gem upon her zone.
> And morning opes with haste her lids
> To gaze upon the pyramids."

As he would not accept a vulgar caricature of the New Englander as a Yankee, so he spurned Captain Bobadil as a type of the American, for he knew that a na-

tion may be as well-bred among nations as a gentleman among gentlemen, and that to bully weakness or to cringe to strength are equally cowardly, and therefore not truly American.

Lowell's loftiest strain is inspired by this patriotic ideal. To borrow a German phrase from modern musical criticism, it is the *leit motif* which is constantly heard in the poems and the essays, and that inspiration reached its loftiest expression, both in prose and poetry, in the discourse on Democracy and the Commemoration ode. The genius of enlightened Greece breathes audibly still in the oration of Pericles on the Peloponnesian dead. The patriotic heart of America throbs forever in Lincoln's Gettysburg address. But nowhere in literature is there a more magnificent and majestic personification of a country whose name is sacred to its children, nowhere a profounder passion of patriotic loyalty, than in the closing lines of the Commemoration ode. The American whose heart, swayed by that

lofty music, does not thrill and palpitate with solemn joy and high resolve, does not yet know what it is to be an American.

Like all citizens of high public ideals, Lowell was inevitably a public critic and censor, but he was much too good a Yankee not to comprehend the practical conditions of political life in this country. No man understood better than he such truth as lies in John Morley's remark: "Parties are a field where action is a long second best, and where the choice constantly lies between two blunders." He did not therefore conclude that there is no alternative, that "naught is everything and everything is naught." But he did see clearly that while the government of a republic must be a government of party, yet that independence of party is much more vitally essential in a republic than fidelity to party. Party is a servant of the people, but a servant who is foolishly permitted by his master to assume sovereign airs, like Christopher Sly, the

tinker, whom the Lord's attendants obsequiously salute as master:

> "Look how thy servants do attend on thee,
> Each in his office ready at thy beck."

To a man of the highest public spirit like Lowell, and of the supreme self-respect which always keeps faith with itself, no spectacle is sadder than that of intelligent, superior, honest public men prostrating themselves before a party, professing what they do not believe, affecting what they do not feel, from abject fear of an invisible fetich, a chimera, a name, to which they alone give reality and force, as the terrified peasant himself made the spectre of the Brocken before which he quailed. The last great patriotic service of Washington, and none is more worthy of enduring commemoration on this anniversary, was the Farewell Address with its strong and stern warning that party government may become a ruthless despotism, and that a majority must be watched as jealously as a king.

With his lofty patriotism and his extraordinary public conscience, Lowell was distinctively the Independent in politics. He was an American and a republican citizen. He acted with parties as every citizen must act if he acts at all. But the notion that a voter is a traitor to one party when he votes with another was as ludicrous to him as the assertion that it is treason to the White Star steamers to take passage in a Cunarder. When he would know his public duty, Lowell turned within, not without. He listened, not for the roar of the majority in the street, but for the still small voice in his own breast. For while the method of republican government is party, its basis is individual conscience and common-sense. This entire political independence Lowell always illustrated. He was born in the last days of New England Federalism. His Uncle, John Lowell, was a leader in the long and bitter Federalist controversy with John Quincy Adams. The Whig dynasty succeeded the Federal

in Massachusetts, but Lowell's first public interest was the antislavery agitation, and he identified himself with the Abolitionists. He retained, however, his individual view, and did not sympathize with the policy that sought the dissolution of the Union, and which refused to vote. In 1850, he says, in a private letter to his friend Gay, alluding to some difference of opinion with the Antislavery Society, "there has never been a oneness of sentiment," that is to say, complete identity, "between me and the Society," and a passage in a letter written upon election day in November, 1850, illustrates his independent position: "I shall vote the Union ticket (half Free Soil, half Democratic), not from any love of the Democrats, but because I believe it to be the best calculated to achieve some practical result. It is a great object to overturn the Whig domination, and this seems to be the only lever to pry them over with. Yet I have my fears that if we get a Democratic governor he will play some

trick or other. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,* if you will pardon stale Latin to Parson Wilbur."

This election is memorable because it overthrew the Whig domination in Massachusetts, and made Charles Sumner the successor of Daniel Webster in the Senate. It restored to the State of Samuel Adams the same political leadership before the Civil War that she had held before the Revolution. The Republican party, with whose antislavery impulse Lowell was in full accord, arose from the Whig ruins, and whether in a party or out of a party, he was himself the great illustration of the political independence that he represented and maintained. As he allowed no church or sect to dictate his religious views or control his daily conduct, so he permitted no party to direct his political action. He was a Whig, an Abolitionist, a Republican, a Democrat, according to his conception of the public exigency, and never as a partisan. From 1863 to 1872 he was joint editor,

with his friend Mr. Norton, of the *North American Review*, and he wrote often of public affairs. But his papers all belong to the higher politics, which are those of the man and the citizen, not of the partisan, a distinction which may be traced in Burke's greatest speeches, where it is easy to distinguish what is said by Burke, the wise and patriotic Englishman, for such he really was, from what is said by the Whig in opposition to the Treasury Bench.

But whatever his party associations and political sympathies, Lowell was at heart and by temperament conservative, and his patriotic independence in our politics is the quality which is always unconsciously recognized as the truly conservative element in the country. In the tumultuous excitement of our popular elections the real appeal on both sides is not to party, which is already committed, but to those citizens who are still open to reason, and may yet be persuaded. In the most recent serious party appeal, the

orator said, "above all things political fitness should lead us not to forget that at the end of our plans we must meet face to face at the polls the voters of the land with ballots in their hands demanding as a condition of the support of our party, fidelity and undivided devotion to the cause in which we have enlisted them." This recognizes an independent tribunal which judges party. It implies that beside the host who march under the party color and vote at the party command, there are citizens who may or may not wear a party uniform, but who vote only at their own individual command, and who give the victory. They may be angrily classified as political Laodiceans, but it is to them that parties appeal, and rightly, because except for this body of citizens, the despotism of party would be absolute and the republic would degenerate into a mere oligarchy of "bosses."

There could be no more signal tribute to political independence than that which

was offered to Lowell in 1876. He was a Republican elector, and the result of the election was disputed. A peaceful solution of the difference seemed for some months to be doubtful, although the constitution apparently furnished it, for if an elector, or more than one, should differ from his party and exercise his express and unquestionable constitutional right, in strict accord with the constitutional intention, the threatened result might be averted. But in the multitude of electors Lowell alone was mentioned as one who might exercise that right. The suggestion was at once indignantly resented as an insult, because it was alleged to imply possible bad faith. But it was not so designed. It indicated that Lowell was felt to be a man who, should he think it to be his duty under the indisputable constitutional provision, to vote differently from the expectation of his party, he would certainly do it. But those who made the suggestion did not perceive that he could not feel it to be his duty, be-

cause nobody saw more clearly than he that an unwritten law with all the force of honor forbade. The constitutional intention was long since superseded by a custom sanctioned by universal approval which makes the Presidential elector the merest ministeral agent of a party, and the most wholly ceremonial figure in our political system.

By the time that he was fifty years old Lowell's conspicuous literary accomplishment and poetic genius, with his political independence, courage, and ability had given him a position and influence unlike those of any other American, and when in 1877 he was appointed Minister to Spain, and in 1880 transferred to England, there was a feeling of blended pride and satisfaction that his country would be not only effectively, but nobly represented. Mr. Emerson once said of an English minister, "He is a charming gentleman, but he does not represent the England that I know." In Lowell, however, no man in the world who honored America

and believed in the grandeur of American destiny but would find his faith and hope confirmed. To give your best, says the oriental proverb, is to do your utmost. The coming of such a man, therefore, was the highest honor that America could pay to England. If we may personify America, we can fancy a certain grim humor on her part in presenting this son of hers to the mother-country, a sapling of the older oak more sinewy and supple than the parent stock. No eminent American has blended the Cavalier and the Puritan tradition, the romantic conservatism and the wise radicalism of the English blood in a finer cosmopolitanism than Lowell. It was this generous comprehension of both which made him peculiarly and intelligently at home in England, and which also made him much more than his Excellency the Ambassador of American literature to the Court of Shakespeare, as the London *Spectator* called him upon his arrival in London, for it made him the representative to

England of an American scholarship, a wit, an intellectual resource, a complete and splendid accomplishment, a social grace and charm, a felicity of public and private speech, and a weight of good sense, which pleasantly challenged England to a continuous and friendly bout in which America did not suffer.

During his official residence in England, Lowell seemed to have the fitting word for every occasion, and to speak it with memorable distinction. If a memorial of Dean Stanley were erected in his Chapter House, or of Fielding at Taunton, or of Coleridge at Westminster Abbey, or of Gray at Cambridge, the desire of literary England turned instinctively to Lowell as the orator whose voice would give the best expression, and whose character and renown the greatest dignity, to the hour. In Wordsworth's England, as President of the Wordsworth Society, he spoke of the poet with an affectionate justice which makes his speech, with the earlier essay, the finest estimate

of Wordsworth's genius and career; and of Don Quixote he spoke to the Workingman's College with a poetic appreciation of the genius of Cervantes and a familiarity with Spanish literature which was a revelation to British workmen. Continuously at public dinners, with consummate tact and singular felicity, he spoke with a charm that seemed to disclose a new art of oratory. He did not decline even political speech, but of course in no partisan sense. His discourse on Democracy at Birmingham, in October, 1884, was not only an event, but an event without precedent. He was the minister of the American republic to the British monarchy, and, as that minister, publicly to declare in England the most radical democratic principles as the ultimate logical result of the British Constitution, and to do it with a temper, an urbanity, a moderation, a precision of statement, and a courteous grace of humor, which charmed doubt into acquiescence and amazement into unfeigned admira-

tion and acknowledgment of a great service to political thought greatly done—this was an event unknown in the annals of diplomacy, and this is what Lowell did at Birmingham.

No American orator has made so clear and comprehensive a declaration of the essential American principle, or so simple a statement of its ethical character. Yet not a word of this republican to whom Algernon Sydney would have bowed, and whom Milton would have blessed, would have jarred the tory nerves of Sir Roger de Coverley, although no English radical was ever more radical than he. The frantic French democracy of '93, gnashing its teeth in the face of royal power, would have equality and fraternity if every man were guillotined to secure it. The American Republic, speaking to monarchical Europe a century later by the same voice with which Sir Launfal had shown the identity of Christianity with human sympathy and succor, set forth in the address at Birmingham the truth that

democracy is simply the practical application of moral principle to politics. There were many and great services in Lowell's life, but none of them all seem to me more characteristic of the man than when, holding the commission of his country and in his own person representing its noblest character, standing upon soil sacred to him by reverend and romantic tradition, his American heart loyal to the English impulse which is the impulse of constitutional liberty, for one memorable moment he made monarchical England feel for republican America the same affectionate admiration that she felt for him, the republican American. His last official words in England show the reciprocal feeling: "While I came here as a far-off cousin," he said, "I feel that you are sending me away as something like a brother." He died: the poet, the scholar, the critic, the public counsellor, the ambassador, the patriot, and the sorrowing voice of the English laureate and of the English Queen, the highest

voices of English literature and political power, mingling with the universal voice of his own country, showed how instinctively and surely the true American, faithful to the spirit of Washington and of Abraham Lincoln, reconciles and not exasperates international feeling.

So varied, so full, and fair is the story of Lowell's life, and such services to the mind and heart and character of his country we commemorate on this hallowed day. In the golden morning of our literature and national life there is no more fascinating and inspiring figure. His literary achievement, his patriotic distinction, and his ennobling influence upon the character and lives of generous American youth, gave him at last power to speak with more authority than any living American for the intellect and conscience of America. Upon those who know him well, so profound was the impression of his resource and power that their words must seem to be mere eulogy. All that he did was but the hint of this su-

perb affluence, this comprehensive grasp; the overflow of an exhaustless supply, so that it seemed to be only incidental, not his life's business. Even his literary production was impromptu. "Sir Launfal" was the work of two days. The "Fable for Critics" was an amusement amid severer studies. The discourse on Democracy was largely written upon the way to Birmingham. Of no man could it be said more truly that

"Half his strength he put not forth."

But that must be always the impression of men of so large a mould and of such public service that they may be properly commemorated on this anniversary. Like mountain summits, bright with sunrise, that announce the day, such Americans are harbingers of the future which shall justify our faith, and fulfil the promise of America to mankind. In our splendid statistics of territorial extension, of the swift civilization of the Western world, of the miracles of our material invention:

in that vast and smiling landscape, the home of a powerful and peaceful people, humming with industry and enterprise, rich with the charm of every climate, from Katahdin that hears the distant roar of the Atlantic to the Golden Gate through which the soft Pacific sighs, and in every form of visible prosperity, we see the resplendent harvest of the mighty sowing, two hundred years ago, of the new continent with the sifted grain of the old. But this is not the picture of national greatness, it is only its glittering frame. Intellectual excellence, noble character, public probity, lofty ideals, art, literature, honest politics, righteous laws, conscientious labor, public spirit, social justice, the stern, sel-criticising patriotism which fosters only what is worthy of an enlightened people, not what is unworthy—such qualities and achievements, and such alone, measure the greatness of a state, and those who illustrate them are great citizens. They are the men whose lives are a glorious service and whose memo-

ries are a benediction. Among that great company of patriots let me to-day, reverently and gratefully, blend the name of Lowell with that of Washington.

AN EPISTLE
TO
GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

AN EPISTLE TO GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

"De prodome,
Des qu'il s'atorne a grant bonte
Ja n'iert tot dit ne tot conte,
Que leingue ne puet pas retraire
Tant d'enor com prodom set faire."
CRESTIEN DE TROIES,
Li Romans dou Chevalier au Lyon, 786-790.

1874.

CURTIS, whose Wit, with Fancy arm in arm,
Masks half its muscle in its skill to charm,
And who so gently can the Wrong expose
As sometimes to make converts, never foes,
Or only such as good men must expect,
Knaves sore with conscience of their own defect,
I come with mild remonstrance. Ere I start,
A kindlier errand interrupts my heart,
And I must utter, though it vex your ears,
The love, the honor, felt so many years.

Curtis, skilled equally with voice and pen
To stir the hearts or mould the minds of men,—
That voice whose music, for I've heard you sing

Sweet as Casella, can with passion ring,
That pen whose rapid ease ne'er trips with haste,
Nor scrapes nor sputters, pointed with good taste,
First Steele's, then Goldsmith's, next it came to you,
Whom Thackeray rated best of all our crew,—
Had letters kept you, every wreath were yours;
Had the World tempted, all its chariest doors
Had swung on flattered hinges to admit
Such high-bred manners, such good-natured wit;
At courts, in senates, who so fit to serve?
And both invited, but you would not swerve,
All meaner prizes waiving that you might
In civic duty spend your heat and light,
Unpaid, untrammelled, with a sweet disdain
Refusing posts men grovel to attain.
Good Man all own you; what is left me, then,
To heighten praise with but Good Citizen?

But why this praise to make you blush and stare,
And give a backache to your Easy-Chair?
Old Crestien rightly says no language can
Express the worth of a true Gentleman,
And I agree; but other thoughts deride
My first intent, and lure my pen aside.
Thinking of you, I see my firelight glow
On other faces, loved from long ago,
Dear to us both, and all these loves combine

With this I send and crowd in every line;
Fortune with me was in such generous mood
That all my friends were yours, and all were good;
Three generations come when one I call,
And the fair grandame, youngest of them all,
In her own Florida who found and sips
The fount that fled from Ponce's longing lips.
How bright they rise and wreath my hearthstone round,
Divine my thoughts, reply without a sound,
And with them many a shape that memory sees,
As dear as they, but crowned with aureoles these!
What wonder if, with protest in my thought,
Arrived, I find 't was only love I brought?
I came with protest; Memory barred the road
Till I repaid you half the debt I owed.

No, 't was not to bring laurels that I came,
Nor would you wish it, daily seeing fame,
(Or our cheap substitute, unknown of yore,)
Dumped like a load of coal at every door,
Mime and hetæra getting equal weight
With him whose toils heroic saved the State.
But praise can harm not who so calmly met
Slander's worst word, nor treasured up the debt,
Knowing, what all experience serves to show,

No mud can soil us but the mud we throw.
You have heard harsher voices and more loud,
As all must, not sworn liegemen of the crowd,
And far aloof your silent mind could keep
As when, in heavens with winter-midnight deep,
The perfect moon hangs thoughtful, nor can know
What hounds her lucent calm drives mad below.
But to my business, while you rub your eyes
And wonder how you ever thought me wise.
Dear friend and old, they say you shake your head
And wish some bitter words of mine unsaid:
I wish they might be,—there we are agreed;
I hate to speak, still more what makes the need;
But I must utter what the voice within
Dictates, for acquiescence dumb were sin;
I blurt ungrateful truths, if so they be,
That none may need to say them after me.
'T were my felicity could I attain
The temperate zeal that balances your brain;
But nature still o'erleaps reflection's plan,
And one must do his service as he can.
Think you it were not pleasanter to speak
Smooth words that leave unflushed the brow and cheek?
To sit, well-dined, with cynic smile, unseen
In private box, spectator of the scene
Where men the comedy of life rehearse,

TWO FRIENDS

Idly to judge which better and which worse
Each hireling actor spoiled his worthless part?
Were it not sweeter with a careless heart,
In happy commune with the untainted brooks,
To dream all day, or, walled with silent books,
To hear nor heed the World's unmeaning noise,
Safe in my fortress stored with lifelong joys?

I love too well the pleasures of retreat
Safe from the crowd and cloistered from the street;
The fire that whispers its domestic joy,
Flickering on walls that knew me still a boy,
And knew my saintly father; the full days,
Not careworn from the world's soul-squandering ways,
Calm days that loiter with snow-silent tread,
Nor break my commune with the undying dead;
Truants of Time, to-morrow like to-day,
That come unbid, and claimless glide away
By shelves that sun them in the indulgent Past,
Where Spanish castles, even, were built to last,
Where saint and sage their silent vigil keep,
And wrong hath ceased or sung itself to sleep.
Dear were my walks, too, gathering fragrant store
Of Mother Nature's simple-minded lore:
I learned all weather-signs of day or night;
No bird but I could name him by his flight,

No distant tree but by his shape was known,
Or, near at hand, by leaf or bark alone.
This learning won by loving looks I hived
As sweeter lore than all from books derived.
I know the charm of hillside, field, and wood,
Of lake and stream, and the sky's downy brood,
Of roads sequestered rimmed with sallow sod,
But friends with hardhack, aster, goldenrod,
Or succory keeping summer long its trust
Of heaven-blue fleckless from the eddying dust:
These were my earliest friends, and latest too,
Still unestranged, whatever fate may do.
For years I had these treasures, knew their worth,
Estate most real man can have on earth.
I sank too deep in this soft-stuffed repose
That hears but rumors of earth's wrongs and woes;
Too well these Capuas could my muscles waste,
Not void of toils, but toils of choice and taste;
These still had kept me could I but have quelled
The Puritan drop that in my veins rebelled.
But there were times when silent were my books
As jailers are, and gave me sullen looks,
When verses palled, and even the woodland path,
By innocent contrast, fed my heart with wrath,
And I must twist my little gift of words
Into a scourge of rough and knotted cords
Unmusical, that whistle as they swing
To leave on shameless backs their purple sting.

How slow Time comes! Gone, who so swift as
he?
Add but a year, 't is half a century
Since the slave's stifled moaning broke my sleep,
Heard 'gainst my will in that seclusion deep,
Haply heard louder for the silence there,
And so my fancied safeguard made my snare.
After that moan had sharpened to a cry,
And the cloud, hand-broad then, heaped all our
sky
With its stored vengeance, and such thunders
stirred
As heaven's and earth's remotest chambers heard,
I looked to see an ampler atmosphere
By that electric passion-gust blown clear.
I looked for this; consider what I see—
But I forbear, 't would please nor you nor me
To check the items in the bitter list
Of all I counted on and all I mist.
Only three instances I choose from all,
And each enough to stir a pigeon's gall:
Office a fund for ballot-brokers made
To pay the drudges of their gainful trade;
Our cities taught what conquered cities feel
By ædiles chosen that they might safely steal;
And gold, however got, a title fair
To such respect as only gold can bear.
I seem to see this; how shall I gainsay
What all our journals tell me every day?

Poured our young martyrs their high-hearted
blood
That we might trample to congenial mud
The soil with such a legacy sublimed?
Methinks an angry scorn is here well-timed:
Where find retreat? How keep reproach at bay?
Where'er I turn some scandal fouls the way.

Dear friend, if any man I wished to please,
'T were surely you whose humor's honied ease
Flows flecked with gold of thought, whose gen-
erous mind
Sees Paradise regained by all mankind,
Whose brave example still to vanward shines,
Checks the retreat, and spurs our lagging lines.
Was I too bitter? Who his phrase can choose
That sees the life-blood of his dearest ooze?
I loved my Country so as only they
Who love a mother fit to die for may;
I loved her old renown, her stainless fame,—
What better proof than that I loathed her shame?
That many blamed me could not irk me long,
But, if you doubted, must I not be wrong?
'T is not for me to answer: this I know,
That man or race so prosperously low
Sunk in success that wrath they cannot feel,
Shall taste the spurn of parting Fortune's heel;
For never land long lease of empire won
Whose sons sate silent when base deeds were done.

TWO FRIENDS

POSTSCRIPT
1887

Curtis, so wrote I thirteen years ago,
Toss't it unfinished by, and left it so;
Found lately, I have pieced it out, or tried,
Since time for callid juncture was denied.
Some of the verses pleased me, it is true,
And still were pertinent,—those honoring you.
These now I offer: take them, if you will,
Like the old hand-grasp, when at Shady Hill
We met, or Staten Island, in the days
When life was its own spur, nor needed praise.
If once you thought me rash, no longer fear;
Past my next milestone waits my seventieth year.
I mount no longer when the trumpets call;
My battle-harness idles on the wall,
The spider's castle, camping-ground of dust,
Not without dints, and all in front, I trust.
Shivering sometimes it calls me as it hears
Afar the charger's tramp and clash of spears;
But 't is such murmur only as might be
The sea-shell's lost tradition of the sea,
That makes me muse and wonder Where? and
When?
While from my cliff I watch the waves of men
That climb to break midway their seeming gain,
And think it triumph if they shake their chain.
Little I ask of Fate; will she refuse
Some days of reconcilement with the Muse?

I take my reed again and blow it free
Of dusty silence, murmuring, "Sing to me!"
And, as its stops my curious touch retries,
The stir of earlier instincts I surprise,—
Instincts, if less imperious, yet more strong,
And happy in the toil that ends with song.

Home am I come: not, as I hoped might be,
To the old haunts, too full of ghosts for me,
But to the olden dreams that time endears,
And the loved books that younger grow with years;
To country rambles, timing with my tread
Some happier verse that carols in my head,
Yet all with sense of something vainly mist,
Of something lost, but when I never wist.
How empty seems to me the populous street,
One figure gone I daily loved to meet,—
The clear, sweet singer with the crown of snow
Not whiter than the thoughts that housed below!
And, ah, what absence feel I at my side,
Like Dante when he missed his laurelled guide,
What sense of diminution in the air
Once so inspiring, Emerson not there!
But life is sweet, though all that makes it sweet
Lessen like sound of friends' departing feet,
And death is beautiful as feet of friend
Coming with welcome at our journey's end;
For me Fate gave, whate'er she else denied,

TWO FRIENDS

A nature sloping to the southern side;
I thank her for it, though when clouds arise
Such natures double-darken gloomy skies.
I muse upon the margin of the sea,
Our common pathway to the new To Be,
Watching the sails, that lessen more and more,
Of good and beautiful embarked before;
With bits of wreck I patch the boat shall bear
Me to that unexhausted Otherwhere,
Whose friendly-peopled shore I sometimes see,
By soft mirage uplifted, beckon me,
Nor sadly hear, as lower sinks the sun,
My moorings to the past snap one by one.

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

CHARLES ELIOT NORTON,

AT ASHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, IN THE TOWN HALL, AUGUST 12TH, 1896, ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEDICATION OF A BRONZE TABLET BEARING AN INSCRIPTION IN HONOR OF MR. CURTIS.

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

NO blessing can befall a community greater than the choice of it by a good man for his home; for the example of such a man sets a standard of conduct, and his influence, unconsciously not less than consciously exerted, tends to lift those who come within its circle to his own level. In the quiet annals of this little town there are many incidents of local and personal interest; but the incident of chief importance to its inhabitants of this generation and of coming times was its selection in 1865, by George William Curtis, for his summer home. Hither for twenty-seven summers he came to find refreshment among these hills and woods, to show himself the best of neighbors, and to exhibit those social virtues and charms

which would have made him beloved and admired by any society which he might have chosen to adorn.

It is well that the Club named in his honor should set up a tablet to commemorate his residence in Ashfield, in this hall where his presence has been so familiar, and where his voice has been so often heard. It is well that the town should accept this tablet, to be sacredly preserved so long as its own ever-renewed life shall last, as a permanent record of great services rendered to it. It is well that we, the town's people, should meet to dedicate this tablet, the inscription upon which records our lasting and grateful affection for the good man whose name it bears.

Happily there are many men in the world, even in a little community like this, whom we, speaking in familiar phrase, should call, and rightly call, good men,— men who perform fairly well the simple duties of life; who try to be, or, at least intend to be, estimable husbands, fathers,

sons, brothers, neighbors; but there are few anywhere whose goodness stands, year in, year out, the wear and tear of common days, whose virtues are never dimmed by slow-collecting rust, or by the dust which rises from even worthy toil and unavoidable cares. So, too, it often happens that among many virtues the one is lacking which is required to give savor to all the rest; that some black drop in the blood betrays itself in moroseness; that feebleness of imagination (the great defect of man) shows itself in failure of sympathetic consideration for those who most stand in need of patient and tender regard.

No, the good man, in the full sense of the word, the man whose virtues never suffer eclipse, and whose goodness is not merely good, but delightful, is one of the rarest gifts of Heaven. Happiest and most welcome of men is the good man whose temperament and disposition combine to make him as pleasant as he is good; whose virtues are the sweet flow-

ering of his nature, trained by experience and perfected by self-discipline; whose character is based on simplicity of heart and who fulfils the New Commandment because for him it is the natural mode of self-expression. And if to such a man be added great gifts alike of body and of soul, the fine form expressing the fine spirit, the sweet voice attuned to the sweet disposition; if in him outward grace be the type of grace of mind, and physical vigor the emblem of intellectual power; if he be endowed with poetic imagination, quickening the moral and invigorating the intellectual elements of his nature; and if all be crowned by a spirit of devotion to public interests,— then we have such a man as he who fills our memories and our hearts to-day.

You have seen him in his daily walk during almost thirty years; can you recall one act, one word of his that was not friendly and pleasant? I, who knew him from youth to age, I, whose life was blessed by his friendship for forty-three

years, find in my memory of him such pleasantness that my words come short to express it. No one could meet him without being better for the meeting. "He makes you feel good," an old Ashfield man said of him.

In his relations with others, whether in private life or in public affairs, he was singularly exemplary; I mean he set an example of simple excellence to each of us, fitted to the various needs and conditions of our lives. And yet his modesty was such, and his simplicity so entire, that he walked among us quite unconscious of the virtue which proceeded from him, never assuming an air of superiority, or claiming the distinction which was his due.

Seldom has there been so general a favorite as he, and seldom a man who received more flattery with less harm to the sincerity of his nature. When he returned home from Europe in 1850, a youth of twenty-six, with keen perceptions of the delights of life, with accomplishments and graces and tastes that opened

every door to him, with literary ambitions which were soon to be gratified by the brilliant success of his first book, with the youth of both sexes crowding round him at Newport, at Saratoga, at New York, to follow his alluring lead, and to catch from him, if they might, the secret of his charm,—at this time he stood at the parting of the ways. As Izaak Walton said of his friend, Sir Henry Wotton, "His company seemed to be one of the delights of mankind." He was flattered and caressed, and for a time he floated on the swift current of pleasure. It would have been so easy to yield to the temptations of the world! But his pure, youthful heart cherished other ideals. He heard the voice of duty saying, "Come, follow me;" and he obeyed. The path along which she led was difficult. The times were dark. He recognized the claim which, in a democracy like ours, the country has on every one of her sons for the best service which he can render. He had a most public soul, and he gave

himself, without reserve, to the cause of justice, of freedom, and of popular intelligence.

His first books, records of impressions of Eastern travel, had shown that he possessed literary gifts of a high order, with a style fluent, facile and elegant, capable of conveying clearly the images of a sensitive and poetic spirit. And the books which followed them gave proof of his delicate sensibilities, and quick and discriminating perceptions. They showed him to be a lover of nature and of the arts, a shrewd observer of men, an acute critic of life, a delicate and tender humorist. The way of simple literary distinction lay open to him. He felt its charm. His nature was averse to conflict. But the times called for strenuous action, and with full consciousness of the attractions of the ease and pleasure which he was relinquishing, he turned from the pursuit of literature as an end in itself, and devoted his literary gifts and accomplishments to political and patriotic service.

In August, 1856, just forty years ago, at the height of the struggle between the forces of freedom and those of slavery before the war, Mr. Curtis, then thirty-two years old, delivered, at Wesleyan University at Middletown, Connecticut, an oration on "The Duty of the American Scholar." It was at once a profession of faith and an appeal to the young scholars of the land to be true to those moral principles which, in a period of material prosperity, are apt to be subordinated to mere temporary interests. It was the first of that long series of speeches which secured to Mr. Curtis a place in the front rank of orators. He had spoken often before in public, but on this occasion he found and manifested his unequivocal vocation as a master of the art of persuasive and powerful eloquence. To all her other gifts to him Nature had added those of the orator. He was of a fine presence and easy grace of carriage, tall and straight; he had strongly marked and expressive features, with the masculine nose and long

upper lip that mark the born public speaker. His voice (it still echoes in our ears) was of wide compass, sweet and rich in tone, perfectly under control, and its harmony was enhanced by his free bearing and effective gesture. Not often has a finer instrument of speech been vouchsafed to a man.

"Do you ask me," said he, in his discourse at Middletown,—"do you ask me our duty as scholars? Gentlemen, as the American scholar is a man, and has a voice in his own government, so his interest in political affairs must precede all others. . . . He must recognize that the intelligent exercise of political rights, which is a privilege in a monarchy, is a duty in a republic. If it clash with his ease, his retirement, his taste, his study, let it clash, but let him do his duty. The course of events is incessant, and when the good deed is slighted the bad deed is done. Young scholars, young Americans, young men, we are all called upon to do a great duty. Nobody is released

from it. It is a work to be done by hard strokes everywhere. Brothers, the call has come to us."

From the date of this oration to the end of his life Mr. Curtis never put off the harness or relinquished the arms of public service. He took an active part in the local politics of the county in which he lived, he became a prominent figure in the politics of the State of New York, he exercised a powerful influence by voice and by pen in shaping the policy of the Republican party in its best years, as well as of the national administration. When the war came, that war which to the generation born since its close seems so remote, but which to us, who lived through it, is in a sense always present, giving poignancy to the disappointment of many of the high-raised hopes of that heroic time,—when the war came, Curtis threw himself into the contest with passionate zeal,—passionate, but not blind or irrational. In the bitter sacrifices of the war he shared.

In 1862 one of his younger brothers fell dead at Fredericksburg, at the head of his regiment, thus gloriously ending a stainless life of twenty-six years. His brother-in-law, the fair young Colonel Robert Shaw, dying at the head of his black regiment in the assault on Fort Sumter, and "buried with his niggers," became the immortal type to all generations of Americans of the hero of human brotherhood. Of the work which had to be done at home, no less essential than that in the field, no man did more, or more effectively, than Curtis. As political editor of *Harper's Weekly*, he exercised an influence not second to that of any other public writer of the time in shaping and confirming popular opinion and sentiment. Nor did his service in this respect end with the war.

Sound in judgment, with clear foresight, with convictions based upon immutable principles, absolutely free from motives of jealousy or ignoble ambition, with no personal ends to serve, neither seeking

nor desiring public office or other station than that which he held, he acquired not only general public confidence and esteem, but secured also the respect of those who most widely differed from him. No man of such influence, especially with the reasonable class of his fellow citizens, could, indeed, escape the enmity of selfish politicians whose interests he opposed and against whose schemes he contended. More than once he became the object of bitter denunciation. He was charged with weakness, with folly, with treachery to his party. The charges never disturbed his serenity, nor drew from him a reply of passion or of personal retort. He was indeed not open to any attack that could break in on the quiet of his soul or ruffle the evenness of his temper. I do not believe that in any controversy in which he was engaged he ever used an ungenerous word or cast a personal imputation upon his opponent. He did not spare the base, the treacherous, and the malignant, but he never dealt an unfair

blow, or in the heat of conflict forgot "the law in calmness made." Wordsworth, in the "Character of the Happy Warrior," has drawn the portrait of our friend, as one—

" Whose high endeavors are an inward light
That makes the path before him always bright.

. . . . . .

Who comprehends his trust, and to the same
Keeps faithful with a singleness of aim;
And therefore does not stoop, nor lie in wait
For wealth, or honors, or for worldly state;
Whom they must follow; on whose head must fall,
Like showers of manna, if they come at all:
Whose powers shed round him in the common strife,
Or mild concerns of ordinary life,
A constant influence, a peculiar grace."

As he, in fine, who—

" Plays in the many games of life, that one
Where what he most doth value must be won."

It was not, however, to service only as a political writer and speaker that Mr. Curtis devoted himself during his long

years of incessant toil. Month after month, from the Easy Chair of "Harper's Magazine," he was scattering broadcast seeds of civilization which took root far and wide. In this long series of brief essays treating of a thousand topics, always fresh, always timely, the grace and skill of his literary art were abundantly displayed. He found here a free field for the expression of his humor, his sentiment, his fancy, his good sense, his critical judgment, his strong moral convictions, his wide sympathies. Manners and customs, arts, letters, passing events, life and death, all the concerns of men, furnished subjects for the wise and pleasant discourse in which his own delightful nature was delightfully mirrored. But ephemeral in topic and slight in fabric as were the most of these little papers, they were more than merely literary essays,—they were bodies of doctrine; and it would be hard to estimate too highly the influence they exerted in refining the taste, quickening the moral sensibilities, and

raising the standard of feeling in a multitude of readers who stood in need of that culture which their brief lessons were eminently fitted to impart. It was an inestimable benefit to many a youth of scant opportunities for association with the best, to have this monthly intercourse with such a teacher.

Conscious of his power and of his influence, aware that from his editor's seat he was helping to shape the policy of parties, to mould the character and to determine the destiny of the nation, it is not strange, however surprising to men of a lower order, that Mr. Curtis never sought for public office, and was never tempted by repeated offers of high station in the public service. Most men would have found it too hard to resist the charm of distinction, and of opportunity for the display of talent upon the conspicuous field which these offers opened to him. The allurement was, indeed, great, but it was not overmastering. He compared one duty with another, and he chose that for which

experience had proved his competence. He was helped in his choice by his preference for simple modes of life, and for quiet domestic joys and social pleasures. He loved his home and his friends too well to quit them for strange courts and brilliant company. And so from year to year he maintained tranquilly his industrious, laborious, unselfish, useful career, with steady increase of his powers, with steady growth in the respect and regard in which he was held by the public, and with the ever-deepening love of his friends.

Of all the many public questions of importance which claimed attention in the years following the war, none was of greater concern than the reform of the civil service. The "spoils system" had become rooted in the practice of the government, both local and national, and in the popular theory of its administration. This system, by which public office was held to be not a place of trust to be awarded only to such as were competent by character and intelligence to discharge

its duties, but a place of emolument given as reward or incentive for partisan or personal services,—this debasing and corrupting system had in the course of years become the source of evils which threatened the very foundation of our institutions. One of the least of these evils was the lowering of the quality of the public service and the degradation of the character of the public servant. To hold public office was no longer a badge of honor, but a token of loss of personal independence and a badge of servitude to a patron. The system poisoned the moral springs of political effort and action; it perverted the nature and the results of elections; it fostered corruption in every department of the government, and tended to vitiate the popular conception of the duty of a citizen in a republic, and of the very ends for which the government exists. To contend against this system, intrenched as it was behind the lines of long custom, defended by the host of selfish, unprincipled, and ignorant politicians, and openly sup-

ported by both the great parties alike, seemed an almost hopeless task. But Mr. Curtis did not shrink from the contest. He had faith in the good sense of the mass of the people, if once they could be roused from their temper of optimistic indifference. The fight had already begun when he entered it, but he had scarcely entered it before he became its leader.

In 1871 he was appointed by President Grant upon the commission to form rules for admission to the public service and regulations to promote its efficiency. He was made chairman of the commission, and their report—the basis of all that has been done in the establishment of the reform—was mainly his work. But the opposition to the project of reform was strenuous, was persistent. The aims of the reformers were often baffled, often defeated. But they were not disheartened. In 1880 the New York Civil Service Reform Association was founded; in 1881, the National League for the same end,—and of both was Mr. Curtis chosen presi-

dent. In both he held this office till his death. The duties were arduous, and were performed by him with consummate fidelity and ability. He was a magnificent standard-bearer. Slowly, but steadily, the cause advanced. He did not live to see its triumph, but he never doubted that it would win the victory.

It was in the summer of 1864 that Mr. Curtis first came to Ashfield. He spent a few days here as my guest; but he saw enough of the pleasant village, and the beautiful country in which it lies, to induce him to come back to it with his family the next summer, and thenceforth to make it his summer home. Resident here during a good portion of each year, for almost the full term of a generation, his life became closely associated with that of this community, and Ashfield has the right to claim him as her child by adoption and his own choice.

The last thirty years, which have witnessed perhaps greater changes in the world than any other similar period ever

knew, have brought many changes to our little town. When Mr. Curtis first came here it was more secluded and remote and more tranquil than it is to-day. It possessed much of the character of an earlier time. It had, indeed, already lost a good part of its population and something of that independence of the rest of the world which, if the ten-mile-square township had been detached from the earth in the earlier years of the century, and sent spinning in space in an orbit of its own, would have enabled it to maintain itself comfortably on its own resources, mental and material. The seventy varieties of industry which had then been practised by its people had already diminished by more than half. There was hardly a farmhouse in which the whirr of the spinning-wheel and the clash of the loom was still heard.

Its little trade with the outer world was still carried on mainly by the numerous peddlers, who resorted to Mr. Bement's store, as a centre from which to draw supplies to replenish the stock of their inexhausti-

ble carts. The old-fashioned tavern, with its long tradition of good cheer, with its sanded floor and hospitable bar-room, afforded accommodation to a few travellers; and from its stables, early every morning, the coach set out on its slow journey along the variously picturesque road to the railroad at South Deerfield, whence it returned late in the afternoon. The invasion of summer boarders had not begun. The Academy was in a condition of suspended animation, and its old building was sadly out of repair. There was no public library, and the subscription library which had once existed, existed no longer. The two Orthodox churches, separated only by the width of the street, but divided from each other by the gulf of a bitter quarrel of long standing, rang their rival bells in harsh discord every Sunday, and each congregation prayed for goodwill on earth, and devoted their schismatic brethren to eternal damnation. The Hoosac Tunnel, which was to open a way toward the sunset, was hardly begun, and

many a year was to pass before the thread of electric wire should tie Ashfield to the restless world beyond. For most of the people life was monotonous, for many of them it was, as it still is, a life of few active pleasures, and of heavy toil; and many a man and woman fretting against the narrow limits of the farm, and restless with the dreams of a wider life, were tempted to bid their little native town farewell, and to try their fortunes in the world which they saw in vision from the mountain-top.

But Ashfield is a place where Nature is beautiful, and where man, even yet, has done but little to deface her beauty. Mr. Curtis, lover of nature and of country pleasures, was attracted by the loveliness of the region; and, tired of the bustle, the interruptions, the noise, the multifarious distractions of cities, was no less attracted by its tranquillity and repose. He did not come here to spend an idle and indolent vacation. There was no interruption in his work as editor of a journal, or as

active and leading participant in political affairs. But though he sought no exemption from labor here, he found refreshment in the fields and woods and in the placid flow of the days; he had the welcome society of a few familiar friends, and he enjoyed the easy and simple relations which he speedily established with his neighbors. They, in their turn, so soon as their natural suspicion of a strange famous settler among them was overcome, learned to hold him in affectionate respect. They,—you,—all learned to know him as one of the friendliest and most simple-hearted of men, ready to take share in your interests, eager to promote every object for the benefit of the community, helpful in difficulty, a reconciler of differences among neighbors, a wise and sympathetic counsellor; kind always and generous, for—

> "July was in his sunny heart,
> October in his liberal hand."

Who that has lived in Ashfield during these years whose life has not been en-

riched by his presence and his words? Who that attended them will forget the autumn lectures which he gave annually to increase the means for the purchase of books for the library? Who that heard his speeches at the Academy dinners, but must remember them as the most eloquent discourse to which he ever listened. Never, not before the most brilliant audiences, not before the most crowded and excited assembly, did Mr. Curtis speak with more splendid and impressive use of his great power than in this little, bare hall of ours, before the scant audience of three or four hundred plain people. I recall especially two occasions when he rose to such heights of noble and impassioned speech as I never knew him to surpass,—once when, indignant with the base attacks made on Mr. Lowell, he spoke of the character of the true American, and in words that came glowing from his heart, set forth his friend as the living exemplar of that character; and once, when having himself been exposed to slander, to abuse, and, worst of

all, to the misconstruction and misjudgment of friends on whom he had relied, he depicted with manly self-assertion the duty and the position of the independent in politics, in religion, or in whatever field of party strife. These were memorable occasions, and it is well that they and others like them, which have made this modest hall one of the sacred buildings of the Commonwealth, should be commemorated by a permanent record of him upon its walls.

Of all the pleasures and benefits which the retirement of Ashfield afforded him there was perhaps none which Mr. Curtis more highly valued than the opportunity which the comparative leisure that he found here gave to him for studious reading,—such reading as might keep the springs of his imagination fresh and full, and might increase and perfect his usefulness as a public counsellor. "Histories," says Bacon, "make men wise," and Curtis was a wide reader of them. Few men had a more exact acquaintance with the

political history of the United States, and he was hardly less familiar with that of Old England than of New. But he did not confine himself to these, and the volumes of Gibbon and of Motley stood as near to his hand as those of Hume, Macaulay, or Bancroft. Important as the history of the United States may be, he knew that it was not to be correctly understood or rightly interpreted except as a small fragment of that of mankind, and especially of that of the great English race. He knew that such instruction in our own history as is too often given in our public schools was a source, not so much of useful knowledge, as of dangerous ignorance, illusion, and conceit. No people can be exclusively bred on its own history without falling into childish and barbaric misconceptions as to its true place in the ranks of civilized communities, and without losing the benefit of those lessons, drawn from the long, sad experience of mankind, upon the laying to heart of which its own progress and security depend.

But Mr. Curtis' days here were not wholly studious. The morning was for work; the afternoon for a walk with familiar companions, or for a long drive over roads, each one of which possesses its special charm of landscape,—it may be the wide open view of hill and dale to where Monadnock rises on the northern horizon, a pyramid of Nature, the monument of solitary past ages to which the pyramids of man seem but of yesterday, or it may be where the shady road runs between bright meadows whose walls are the venerable records in stone of the hard, laborious lives of the fathers of the town.

How many are the happy evenings that I recall of gay or serious talk, of poetry, of music, of all the various pleasures of friendliest social intercourse, and then the lighted lantern, and the late Good-Night!

It was a wholesome and simple, pleasant life. And controlling it all, diffused through it, was the sweet, high, gener-

ous spirit of him who was its central figure, loving and beloved of young and old.

"That comely face, that manly brow,
That cordial hand, that bearing free,
I see them still, I see them now,
Shall always see!

"And what but gentleness untired,
And what but noble feeling warm,
Wherever shown, howe'er inspired
Is grace, is charm?"

The path between his door and mine is no longer worn as of old, the summer has lost its chief delight, but Ashfield is forever dearer for its memories of him; and not in my own heart only, but in all our hearts, fellow-townsmen, the remembrance shall abide to quicken what is best within us, to make us kinder and pleasanter to each other, more public-spirited, better citizens and better men.

Even while he was alive and walking with us his figure had an ideal stamp. There was no need of the haze of time and remoteness to give nobility to its outlines, or to bring it into the eye and pros-

pect of our souls apparelled in more precious habit than it wore in daily life. The actual man, our neighbor, editor of "Harper's Weekly," member of political conventions, occupied, as we all are, with commonplace cares and duties, modest, simple as the simplest, one of ourselves,—he, even in the prose of life, was a poetic figure, bearing himself above the dust and worry of the earth, and living as a denizen of a world, such as that place which Plutarch says the poets feign for the abode of the gods,—a secure and quiet seat, free from all hazards and commotions, untroubled with storms, unclouded, and illumined with a soft serenity and a pure light such as befits a blessed and immortal nature.

Four years have passed since the death of Mr. Curtis. The sense of personal bereavement and of public loss does not grow less as time goes on. New questions have arisen and new perils threaten us. The times have grown darker. No lover of his country can look forward without

anxiety. At this moment of popular delusion, of confusion of parties, of excited passions; at this moment, when only a choice of evils seems to lie before us,—we long to hear (alas! that we should long in vain) that clear voice of prudent and sagacious counsel to which we were wont to listen for instruction and guidance, enforcing upon the intelligence and the conscience of the people the truth that national safety and prosperity rest securely only upon the foundation of moral rectitude.

The perils that confront us are not transient, nor to be overcome by a spasmodic effort and the result of an election. The infuriate clamor for war, the eager cry for free silver and fiat money, the demand for subsidy under the name of protection, may be suppressed: but they are only the symptoms of disease, and to suppress them is no more a remedy for the disease, than to check a fit of coughing by an opiate is the remedy for consumption. The disease is the

ignorance and the consequent lack of public morality of a large part of the people of our republic. To contend with this ignorance, to enlighten it, and in enlightening it to vanquish it, is our task. A long, a difficult, an uncertain fight lies before us. It is the fight of civilization against barbarism in America. It is the new form of the "good old fight," fought ever in different ages under different names.

I was wrong just now in saying that we could not hear the voice of our friend. He speaks: "Whatever in human nature is hopeful, generous, aspiring,—the love of God and trust in man,—is arrayed on one side." On that side he stood among the foremost. On that side let us stand.

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